



In collaboration with:

Cities Alliance
Cities Without Slums

Live Learning Experience: *Beyond the immediate response to the outbreak of COVID-19*

Addressing COVID-19 in informal contexts

Briefing & Learning Note
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Launched jointly by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Metropolis, and UN-Habitat on March 25th, 2020, the **#BeyondTheOutbreak** Live Learning Experience (LLE) virtual sessions aim to bring together Local and Regional Governments (LRGs), their associations, and partner organizations to allow and promote meaningful exchange as they find themselves confronting the COVID-19 crisis while maintaining an orderly functioning of public services. Following an initial consultation held during the launching session, the eighth thematic LLE, held on Wednesday 29 April **in collaboration with Cities Alliance**, explored how **local and regional governments were addressing the COVID-19 crisis and its relationship with contexts of informality**.

Over 200 participants joined the session, which featured the Mayors of Banjul, Freetown, and Subang Jaya, the Secretary of Government of Cali, and the Vice-Minister of Housing and Human Settlements of Costa Rica. The session also counted with partners such as the Akiba Mashinani Trust, Habitat for Humanity, Habitat International Coalition, REFELA Ghana, WIEGO, the World Bank, as well as representatives from the private sector, the academia, and the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments.

Local and regional governments (LRGs) are the first responders to the crisis and play an essential role in guaranteeing rights protection for all via local public service provision. They are vital in ensuring that essential public services are maintained at an adequate level and that both formal and informal workers are able to continue subsiding despite the strong restrictions in place – thus preventing informal workers, particularly women, from falling into poverty and having their vulnerability exacerbated.

As of 2020, it is estimated that approximately a quarter of the world's urban population, representing around 1 billion people, live in informal settlements. These informal settlements are largely inhabited by the poorest of the urban population, many of whom are also essential workers for the daily functioning of cities. It is also estimated that 61% of all workers are informally employed, 2 billion women and men worldwide deprived of decent working conditions and work-based protections, many of whom depend on daily income flows derived from informal economic activities that cannot be conducted remotely. As COVID-19 spreads and reaches many of these more vulnerable populations, it has exacerbated their critical vulnerabilities in accessing basic services due to pre-existing inadequate housing conditions, increased food insecurity and limited access to formal health services and livelihood opportunities.

The challenge posed by addressing COVID-19 in informal settlements is highly complex, as most of the policy responses that are being adopted to curb the virus' spread in formal contexts are not applicable in informal ones. The question becomes how to ensure the fulfillment of the right to the city of populations living in such fragile contexts? In order to act now, we require policy coherence that comes from the coordination between all levels of government and all relevant stakeholders -- amongst which informal settlements' inhabitants and workers must play a critical role. The current crisis poses unprecedented challenges, yet also represents an opportunity to break away from the status quo and





Local and regional governments play a critical role in addressing informalities during and beyond the current COVID-19 pandemic

Local and regional governments as essential actors in ensuring protection to people living and working in informal contexts in the face of the pandemic

While confinement, hand-washing, and physical distancing measures have been the main strategy in many countries, participants emphasized how these measures are not realistic in informal contexts, with densely populated settlements, workers relying on daily income and with no possibility of working from home, and limited access to basic services. In such contexts, as was pointed out by the Vice Minister of Costa Rica, local governments are the best positioned to implement locally grounded and locally sensitive measures. Cities across the world are working to close the gap between protocols and reality, and secure access to basic services, particularly water, in informal contexts.

Participants, such as Yvonne Aki-Sawyer and Rohey Malick Lowe, the mayors of Freetown and Banjul, as well as Jesús González, the Secretary of Government of Santiago de Cali, equally stressed how it is determinant to directly **engage with local communities** from the earliest stages of prevention and response. Freetown's mayor, for instance, explained how the city's current response to COVID-19 had built upon the strategy developed to respond to Ebola, based on defining a clear management structure at the local level that allows for clear information flows and fosters community ownership. The mayor stressed the key importance of community outreach in order to achieve the strategy's threefold objectives, namely, to isolate, track and control the virus's spread: "engaging with sector-specific community groups, people with disabilities, Ebola survivors... We worked with them all to reach the most vulnerable communities and then every community". Similar experiences were brought to the front by the Mayor of Banjul and by Cali's Secretary of Government, who also highlighted how proper communication with communities enhances co-responsibility, which is a particularly important dimension of responding to the pandemic in informal contexts facing sanitation challenges.

These cities have also worked directly with the community to provide **access to water** and handing out masks, gloves, and basic disinfecting supplies. Cali's Secretary of Government, for instance, shared the city's positive experience with providing food and health materials such as face masks and gloves directly to communities and entrusting them with the distribution tasks, which resulted in increased efficiency. Freetown's mayor shared how the city government is using the opportunity to go beyond temporary solutions, aiming to also build the resilience of informal settlements by putting in place rainwater harvesting, decentralized stream filtering systems and urban farms in these communities. Securing the **provision of food** has been a key line of action in many cities, with governments in Cali and Freetown working with the community to foster community kitchens and food solidarity. Noraini Roslan, mayor of Subang Jaya, shared how the local government is coordinating





food donations and delivery, working to disinfect markets and ensuring hygienic measures can be taken by food handlers, including unregistered and home-based businesses. This is also being done by the city of Banjul and promoted by REFELA members in Africa, with particular emphasis on adopting a gender approach, recognizing the large representation and dependency of women in the informal economy.

COVID-19 and the Informal Economy

In light of the important restrictions on the movement of people, the functioning of services, and rules on physical distancing due to the current pandemic, the session posed itself the challenge of identifying in what ways is the COVID-19 pandemic affecting people working in informal jobs. Difficult questions were raised such as: How can we ask informal dwellers to self-quarantine when they face evictions and/or rely on the daily cash flows of economic activity that cannot be developed remotely and the demand for which has fallen drastically? How can we ensure that the livelihoods of citizens living in informal settlements remain sustainable and what actions can be taken in this regard? How can systems critical to the functioning of cities and dependent on informal labour, like food distribution and waste collection, continue in ways that prevent the spread of the virus? Finally, regarding the issue of gender equality, speakers brought up the question of how can we ensure that the challenges affecting the informal economy do not further burden women and aggravate the gender gap?

During the session, the issues of access to land, **halting evictions and access to finance** were brought up by various speakers underlining the importance of halting evictions in informal settlements to allow for citizens to be able to safeguard their health and protect their human rights, as well as to ensure that they are fully protected during the harsh times of quarantine. In this regard, speakers including William Cobbett, Director of Cities Alliance, highlighted the need for secure access to land, mapping and inclusion of informal settlements in planning and budget at the city-wide level. Patricio Morera, Costa Rica's Vice Minister, Ministry of Housing and Human Settlements, underlined that national governments should particularly focus on areas where the most vulnerable areas of the population live including people living in informal settlements and collaborate with all levels of government to properly ensure a halt on evictions. It was also made clear by Filiep Decorte, UN Habitat Chief Programme Development that to be able to fully mitigate the negative effects of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable, access to resources for local and regional governments would be essential.

Other important economic measures highlighted to be of high priority for local and regional governments included implementing **debt repayment moratoriums** for loans, income support measures for citizens in need, safety nets for workers working in the informal economy, among others. To this end, Noraini Roslan, Mayor of Subang Jaya brought up the important positive effects debt repayment moratoriums can have on citizens living under financial strain as the extra income can act as safety nets for emergencies. Rohey Malick Lowe, Mayor of Banjul, also stressed that measures needed to be taken to protect informal workers as getting sick meant not being able to bring in income.





The issue of **protecting women and informal workers** in the informal economy was also brought up highlighting the importance that informal workers play in society. Caroline Skinner, Director of Urban Research, WIEGO noted that in the Global South research shows informal producers and distributors are central to the food security of low income households. In many cities waste pickers supply most, if not the only, form of solid waste collection at little or no cost to municipalities. She argued that local government institutions should contribute to 'unlocking' these informal systems provided that there are necessary safety measures in place for workers. Adriana Allen, president of Habitat International Coalition underlined that we must work hard to ensure that people living and working in informal contexts actively participate in society. In this regard, the Mayor of Freetown has stressed the importance of having women in decision-making positions to better address the disproportionate impact of the crisis on women and girls working in informal sectors. Hajia Mariam Iddrisu, President of REFELA Ghana emphasized that when implementing economic and safety measures for citizens, we must take into account the disproportionate number of women in various places of the world taking part in the informal economy.

Overall, it was made clear that **policy environments that enable local action** by providing access to LRGs with sufficient resources to implement necessary economic measures, ensure multilevel cooperation and that provide a framework to protecting workers in the informal economy while allowing LRGs to advance in the promotion of gender equality, are key to harness the potential of the local level to become a solid first line of defense against the virus - as well as to advance populations' right to the city.

The proper acknowledgment of informal contexts and community-led initiatives as necessary conditions for effective COVID-19 responses

Throughout the whole session, one of the dimensions of addressing the pandemic in informal contexts that was most stressed by participants was the imperative need of doing so in close collaboration with local communities. As was reminded by Steve Weir from Habitat for Humanity, the Town Hall process initiated in Durban called for a change of narrative regarding informality, which is now more pressing than ever. In such respect, and as was reflected in the outcome policy paper on "Addressing Informalities in Cities", it is necessary to adopt a broader narrative on informality that is, first and foremost, based on the proper recognition, support and inclusion of communities living and working in informal contexts as integral parts of cities.

In that sense, a key aspect highlighted both in the paper as well as in participants' contributions was the need to include all stakeholders - public, private and community organizations in particular - in partnerships to promote an integral approach to city development that properly acknowledges informal contexts and fosters policy coherence. Moreover, as Jean Pierre Elong Mbassi, the Secretary General of UCLG Africa pointed out, partnerships that not only work for the "winners" but that are based on equivalence instead are needed to trigger real change. Other participants, such as Jane Weru, the Executive Director of the Akiba Mashinani Trust, presented the Mukuru initiative in Nairobi, a successful partnership based on the collaboration between the city government, the private sector, NGOs and the local community, which effectively led to the definition of a Special





Planning Area that contributed to the provision of water and sanitation to the plot level in informal settlements -- and which the national government is now asking to mainstream. Nevertheless, participants such as the Mayor of Freetown pointed at challenges that arose in previous efforts to coordinate with national government, such as local governments being starved of information and resources.

Another key point that was raised by participants was the need to properly acknowledge the initiatives of communities themselves and provide enabling environments that are conducive for harnessing grassroots action. Both Caroline Skinner, WIEGO's Director of Urban Research, and Barbara Lipietz, Associate Professor at the Bartlett Development Planning Unit of UCL, emphasized how communities are coming up with place-based, nuanced responses which need to be recognized and fostered. One key dimension in which such recognition needs to happen is community-led geostategic data generation and collection. As Adriana Allen, the President of Habitat International Coalition put it, "in order to put in motion the redistribution of resources that needs to underpin structural change, we need to ask ourselves how much we know and acknowledge the data generated on a daily basis in informal contexts as legitimate". Operationalizing such idea, Patricio Morera, Vice Minister of Costa Rica's Ministry of Housing and Human Settlements illustrated with the country's experience how it is key to prioritize local level geostatistics to orientate national to local action plans.

Lessons learnt so far: Key messages and ways forward

1. Local and regional governments play a vital role in protecting all citizens in the face of COVID-19: they ensure the provision of basic services and support livelihoods in informal contexts.

As was highlighted by the majority of participants to the session, including the Executive Director of UN-Habitat, local and regional governments are playing a leading role ensuring workers' safety, providing clear information and advice, and working with community leaders to lay the groundwork for providing inclusive responses to the pandemic. Participants exchanged experiences of local governments proving first respondents to the outbreak, working to ensure the monitoring and sanitizing of public spaces, distributing PPE equipment and food to communities living in informal settlements. Furthermore, it was shared how local and regional governments are also putting in efforts to prevent evictions in informal settlements, implementing debt repayment moratoriums for loans and rents, exemptions for services fees (guaranteeing continuous provision of basic services), income support measures and safety nets for vulnerable populations living and working in informal contexts, oftentimes in coordination and backed by laws and regulations established by higher levels of government. In such sense, participants called for paying special attention to the importance of putting in place safety nets that acknowledge the existing layers of inequalities, particularly stressing the need to support women are overrepresented in informal contexts and in care tasks and thus remarkably exposed to all risks.





2. It is critical to develop frameworks of understanding among all spheres of government and all stakeholders to ensure policy coherence in responding to the crisis and beyond.

“We need everybody on board” was a sentiment echoed by participants throughout the exercise. Mayors from all over the world shared initiatives undertaken in partnership with national governments, which range from economic support measures to citizens working in the informal economy to response initiatives based on aligning local response plans with their national counterparts, to name a few. Participants from the private sector equally highlighted examples of successful collaboration initiatives based on building up coalitions which are inclusive of all stakeholders, in order to ensure the provision of basic services to all populations.

Yet, a key aspect raised during the session is that, in order to establish dignified and thus effective collaboration and governance arrangements, it is necessary to have policy environments that enable local action, ensure multilevel cooperation and policy coherence. Nationally-set policy environments that endow LRGs with sufficient resources and budgetary authority, thus providing a regulatory framework that allows LRGs to become a solid first line of defense against the virus, are necessary. Likewise, local and regional governments are responsible for creating equally enabling conditions to acknowledge and support grassroots action so as to truly enhance the effectiveness of responses to the crisis, as well as to advance populations’ right to the city.

3. Engaging local communities from the earliest stages enhances the effectiveness of responses to the pandemic: community outreach and proper communication flows as pillars

As was illustrated by the experiences shared by participants, LRGs are implementing both preemptive and response strategies, as well as planning for building back better in the aftermath. The importance of setting in motion preemptive strategies to curb the virus’ spread in informal contexts was stressed by many participants, who also shared how a determinant success factor was to properly reach out to the local communities and ensure they are provided with clear information flows. In responding to the crisis on the ground, many examples were shared of how local and regional governments are engaging directly with local communities to, for instance, distribute food and sanitary materials in the most efficient way possible. Moreover, LRGs are also recurrently sanitizing the public spaces where informal economic activities take place or ensuring safe mobility means for populations to reach their livelihoods, these initiatives often being implemented by informal settlements’ inhabitants themselves. And the key role of women, who are often very active within community-based and slum dwellers organizations, need to be fully recognized by LRGs. Furthermore, acknowledging the legitimacy of the data generated and collected in informal contexts themselves was also stressed as key to responding to the current crisis as well as to plan ahead and trigger structural change, as being able to map the needs of populations on the ground and the resources available is determinant to identify the most effective response measures and related communication strategies, both during and beyond the outbreak.





In sum, exchanges held throughout the session pointed at it being key that LRGs work in close collaboration with local communities in informal settlements, as their knowledges and capacities are essential to provide a response to the crisis which is actually fit for the reality of each informal context. Building trust among local and regional governments and local communities was thus seen as a critical factor to succeed in addressing this crisis and ensuring being prepared for the ones that will come.

4. Properly acknowledging informal contexts as integral part of our cities is not only key to elaborate effective COVID-19 responses, but a necessary condition to trigger structural change

The proper acknowledgement of informal settlements and of the informal economy as integral parts of our cities was raised by participants as the keystone of the discussion. Leaving the 1 billion people living in informal settlements and the 2 billion people working in the informal behind is simply not an option if we want to effectively address this crisis and build up our resilience to the ones to come. Participants shared how, for such proper acknowledgement to take place, it is necessary to recognize the interdependency between formal and informal systems, adopting a holistic approach that takes into account all dimensions of informality, be it informal housing, transport, waste management and property rights, among others. They also stressed the importance of addressing the redistribution of resources underpinning the current dynamics that perpetuate inequalities. In order to do so, participants highlighted the need to ensure that organized community representation is institutionally acknowledged and provided with a seat at the decision-making table. Yet, attention was also brought to the fact that no single level of government can do this alone, and that multilevel cooperation will therefore prove determinant in responding to the current crisis and triggering structural change towards equality in the aftermath.

Resources

The presentations made by the cities during this Live Learning Experience are available [here](#). The [Cities for Global Health platform](#), facilitated by Metropolis, is a living repository of LRGs' initiatives to confront the COVID-19 crisis. For further information, please refer to the related resources shared during the session and included below.

- UCLG's Decalogue for the aftermath - [English](#) / [Spanish](#) / [French](#)
- UN's framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19 - [English](#)
- Cities Alliance's Newsroom - [English](#)
- WIEGO: COVID-19, Informal Workers and WIEGO's Work during this Crisis - [English](#) / [Spanish](#) / [French](#)
- African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town - [English](#)
- Costa Rica's "Protocolo para asentamientos informales ante el COVID-19" - [Spanish](#)
- Habitat International Coalition: "Social Justice in the face of the COVID-19 crisis" - [English](#) / [Spanish](#) / [French](#)

